

**Fabienne
Verdier**

Contents

Introduction	
Fabienne Verdier in Conversation with Michael Peppiatt	6-13
Recent works	14-93
Memories of Norway	14-37
Circles	38-45
Fractalscapes	46-57
Energy Fields	58-75
Colour Flows	76-93
Curriculum Vitae	94-97
Acknowledgements	98-99



Introduction

Fabienne Verdier in Conversation with Michael Peppiatt

The following conversation took place in Fabienne Verdier's home in a Normandy village less than a hour's drive west of Paris. We spent time in the studio (a large ground floor where the artist paints and an upper storey where pictures are stored) to look at recent works, then moved to an adjacent, well-stocked library in order to record our talk. As in everything she undertakes, Fabienne Verdier was totally focussed as we discussed her life and her art. But this concentration did not exclude an underlying sense of fun and frequent laughter.

MICHAEL PEPPIATT: Fabienne, what made you want to paint? Can we go back to the very beginning and talk about how you started?

FABIENNE VERDIER: It came out of a terrible feeling of loneliness, of being cut off from others. Words just didn't seem to convey the intensity of feeling that was welling up inside me, so I had to find another way of expressing myself. Once I started painting – just using a small brush and a few colours – I felt I was able to open up whole areas of deep emotion and being. And that soon seemed to me the best way I had of really communicating with others.

MP: And you had all the materials you needed to paint at home because your father...

FV: Yes, my father loved painting and sculpture. He had been involved in the May 1968 events in Paris, and when I was little he was living on a houseboat on the Seine just beneath the Musée d'art moderne. My parents had split up early on. I was the eldest of five children, and when we went to stay with my father we used to roller-skate up and down outside the Museum and then go in and see all the exhibitions that were on there. Basically I was brought up between that kind of life and a more traditional, bourgeois background.

MP: So art was a kind of refuge for you?

FV: Completely. Playing round César's 'Thumb' and Tinguely's machines and being drawn into Yves Klein's paintings made me aware, even when I was a little girl, of what art could bring to the world.

MP: So were you already thinking of becoming a painter?

FV: Not yet, not at that age, but I did ask my father to teach me to paint. So we set up easels on the quayside and he gave me some lessons and showed me how to paint the backs of other houseboats. But it was done as a kind of hobby, something you did on a Sunday. I knew I wanted to go much further than that.

MP: So what was the decisive moment?

FV: By the time I was sixteen I'd decided to study art and devote my life to painting – something my whole family strongly disapproved of! I'd gained a lot from visits to museums, but I was very disappointed by the teaching I found in the art

Introduction
Recent works
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

schools we had here in France. We're talking about the mid-1970s, when everything had gone 'conceptual'. And what I was looking for was the mystery that could be created in a single stroke of the paintbrush. So I said to myself, perhaps I should open up to other cultures, and I began reading classical Chinese texts on aesthetics. I became fascinated by the notion of mankind living in harmony with the world through art – as opposed to being an artist and going around and announcing 'I am an important creator'... (Laughter)

MP: Where was your art school?

FV: In Toulouse. And I was lucky enough around that time to win a scholarship which came with a studio of my own to work in in Paris. But I turned it down, and in front of the mayor of Toulouse I asked whether there wasn't an art school in China that would take me and teach me their traditional painting. The mayor was completely taken aback, but by chance he had just signed an agreement linking Toulouse with Chongqing where there is a very big art school. So I became the first exchange student between the two cities.

MP: So that was in 1982, and you stayed in China for the following ten years?

FV: At first I was supposed to stay just one year so that I could get a smattering of Chinese culture. I was very young and naïve and it hadn't occurred to me that I would be landing in the middle of a totalitarian system overshadowed by its recent, tragic past. The cultural revolution had taken place only ten years earlier, and the art schools were based on Soviet academies and still very turned in on themselves.

MP: You tell the whole remarkable story of your experiences in China in your book, *Passagère du Silence*. Since you found living and working in China so difficult, what persuaded you to stay so long?

FV: I was horrified to hear and see what had happened to artists and intellectuals in China, but like a kind of 'painter-ethnologist' I was also fascinated to meet some of those who had survived. While I was trying to gain acceptance as a model foreign student, I also made underground links that brought me into contact with some of these old masters – who were between eighty and hundred years old at the time. And when you meet such extraordinary, admirable, cultivated spirits, you really have no choice but to stay with them and learn from them and reconsider everything you've taken in before in the light of their experience.

MP: They had been left by the roadside and forgotten?

FV: Forgotten and not rehabilitated, and they were living in terrible solitude. And I myself was in a difficult position as a 'da bizi', as they call us - a long-nosed Westerner (Laughter). I'd learnt Mandarin, but I was living in Sichuan, so I had to get to grips with the local language in order to communicate, and I was spending all my nights swotting up language courses and poring over dictionaries.

MP: And this was all basically to help you improve your knowledge and skills in calligraphy?

FV: I didn't go to China to learn calligraphy but Chinese painting and the aesthetics and philosophy and poetry that feed into it. Then I met old master Huang, who said to me: 'Calligraphy is several thousand years old. It will open the doors of abstraction to you and show you that another form of abstraction is possible in painting which is not European or American abstraction but something quite different. So I have to teach you so that you in turn can change and perhaps bring something to Western painting'.

MP: So for ten years you absorbed a huge number of influences from this ancient tradition?

FV: So much so that I barely saw the ten years go by! (Laughter)

MP: Could you have spent your whole life there or did a moment come when...?

FV: No, my health simply gave way because...

MP: Life was so tough?

FV: Life was incredibly tough and I got badly sick on several occasions with hepatitis and a food poisoning so nasty it left me weighing only thirty kilos. And then of course there was the pressure of all the work. Because, you know, re-questioning everything you have ever learnt about life and art, right down to how you make a stroke with a paint brush, turns you inside out. And if you don't do it, you can't take a new culture on board. I wasn't in China as a tourist, just dipping into this or that in their culture to massage my ego. I wanted to forget everything I had learnt and merge as closely as I could with Chinese tradition. Otherwise, the whole experience was pointless. And that's what took up the ten years.

MP: If you hadn't had health problems, would you have stayed?

FV: I might have stayed longer because Chinese culture is so ancient and so fascinating that you learn something new each day about any number of different aspects of it. And it all feeds into painting, whether you're learning about poetry, music or theatre. Their ways of thinking and of perceiving the world are so different from ours.

MP: Towards the end of your stay, did the Chinese you knew think of you as someone who had absorbed their traditions at all adequately?

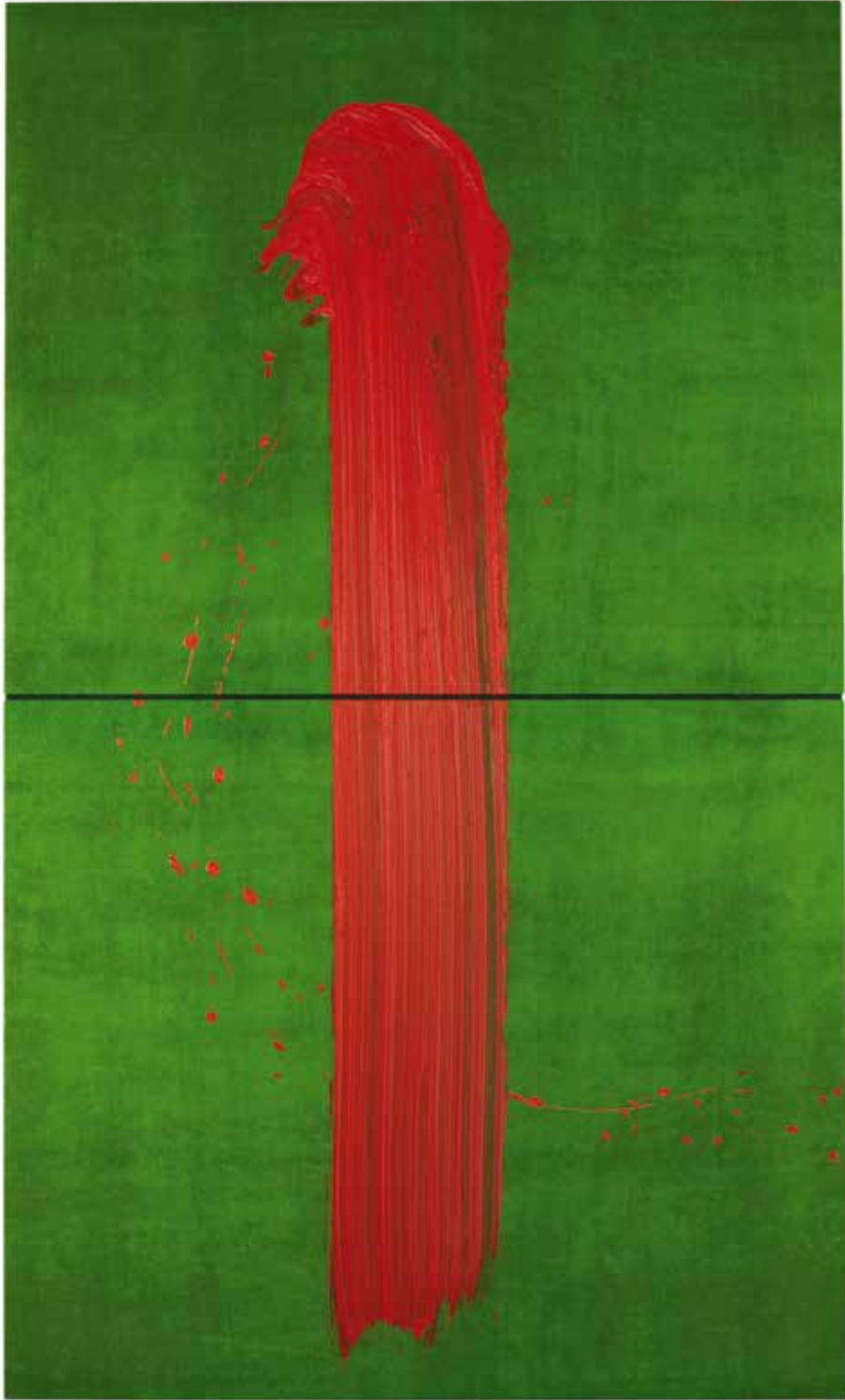
FV: No, because during the 1980s no one was studying the old culture in order to create a contemporary culture – it was considered subversive. So artists were afraid of studying the classic tradition or they were so brainwashed by Maoist doctrine that they thought their own tradition was dead and that they had to build a new one based on popular or peasant culture. They also tried to absorb European painting through artists like Van Gogh or Chagall, for instance, and

Introduction

Recent works

Curriculum Vitae

Acknowledgements



L'un 2011
Mixed media on canvas
Vertical Diptych
250 x 150 cm

they experimented with American painting by gently merging Warhol's influence with social realism and Maoist imagery. It was a very strange situation.

MP: Did you have another shock when you came back to France? Did you feel you had to make a kind of synthesis of the two cultures?

FV: It was a shock that both shook me up and put me back together again. My way of thinking had been so changed by my experiences in China that I simply couldn't look at European culture in the same way. I'd been very much into gestural and abstract painting before I left, but when I got back I found some of it unbearable! So, since my return to France, I've had to rethink my whole attitude to Western art by going back to the museums and by creating an art library, here in this room, where I come to read and draw every day. I've rediscovered a whole range of painters, from Monet, Cézanne and Matisse to Dubuffet, De Kooning and Brice Marden.

MP: You are clearly able to assimilate a huge variety of influences.

FV: Yes, but you know Chinese calligraphy taught me something very interesting. You take things as if you were playing a game, and the more complex the game becomes the more pleasure you find in playing it. If you think about an ideogram, you might have twenty-four strokes – like a mathematical construction in space. And you have to transmit the substance and structure of those twenty-four strokes, with all their poetic and philosophical implications, in a single movement of the brush! And it must be done in such a way that a master of calligraphy can stand in front of it and find the original mathematical construction and the poetical intuition that went into it, as well as all the calligrapher's own experience and input.

MP: Have you now gone back to Western art practices at all?

FV: I very much enjoy working directly from nature, like many Western artists - Cézanne for one. But when I was in China and we went on an art school trip to the holy mountains, with all the students and the masters, everyone laughed at me when I set up an easel to make studies of the landscape. They thought it completely absurd, and I was very upset. Then one of the old masters explained to me that when you were in front of a beautiful landscape you had to let it enter you and become part of you and wait until it had been reduced to its essence before even thinking of drawing or painting it.

MP: Do you meditate before beginning a painting? How do you go about your work?

FV: A bit like a monk, because we are very cut off from the world here. I couldn't work like, say, Francis Bacon, going out every night from bar to bar. I need silence and to be in close contact with nature. When I come out of the house in the morning I enjoy crossing the garden, smelling the damp of the earth and listening to the birds sing – I find it marvelous that they do sing, from morning to morning! And that contact with the spirit and spontaneity of life puts me in mind of the truth that I want to live in and convey through my painting. So I tend to go down to my studio in the morning and work

for four or five hours completely closed off in what I call a ‘Cistercian’ light filtering through from above. Then I might go to the upper part of the studio, the mezzanine, which is open to views on to the garden where I can get my energy back and contemplate the things that go into my work - like the autumn wind blowing through the trees. Then I often retire here, to this library, where I can draw and make notes and read.

MP: So when you’re not painting, you’re preparing in one or another way to paint again.

FV: Well, I’ve been doing that for the last thirty years. And when you are painting the way I paint, moving a huge brush across a large surface spread out on the floor, the least vibration in your mind or body is caught and recorded in the painting. It’s not just that I am one with the brush. My husband and I created the whole space and the technique so that I could also be one with the centre of gravity and play with all the fundamental forces that releases. I don’t believe one is in control when one creates - it’s an illusion, because we are no more than specks of dust in space. But when I put myself at the centre of gravity by standing up and moving with the brush, I feel I am tapping into these forces and the truth that’s transmitted goes far beyond me as an individual. At that point I feel the most important thing I have to do is to respond to these forces and transcribe them.

MP: Do you think that the image that comes about was in some sense inevitable?

FV: It’s not as simple as that. I know from experience that these forces will impact on the painting I’m doing and influence it to some extent. So I take that into account when I load the brush, choosing paints that are more or less fluid or viscous, and when I move across the surface, I go that bit faster or I exercise greater restraint. I never know what the result will be like until the painting is completely finished. The forces come into play here, too. If it’s a warm day, the paint will dry in a certain way, with a different overall result, and in another way if the weather is cold.

MP: And sometimes things turn out in ways that don’t satisfy you?

FV: Absolutely. I destroy about seventy per cent of my work. I can’t really tell you how I know when or why it goes wrong. It only takes a dash of pretentiousness or intellectualism or some overly lyrical element to make the whole thing look and feel unbearable. I think all these years searching for spontaneity and harmony in different cultures has helped me know when a work is not right, but I couldn’t really explain why.

MP: In the cycle of paintings inspired by the Flemish masters that you’ve been working on over the past four years, I was particularly fascinated by the way you took a detail – from the complex, closely woven headdress of van Eyck’s wife – and made pictures inspired by it from such different perspectives and on such dissimilar scales that they could be waves or the outline of a coast seen from the air.

FV: My eye was drawn to that detail in Margareta’s headdress because it reminded me of a labyrinth. It’s very personal and has nothing to do with art history, but I’m fascinated by labyrinths, as I think people have always been, and I made

endless studies in my notebooks on the theme. What I didn’t realize was that the motif would lead me into all kinds of linear meanderings, which I think must be a very ancient, archetypal form we all carry around with us. I was in Quebec not long ago and I was oddly moved by the way the sea forced its way up into the St Lawrence river, creating labyrinthine patterns in the water. I found it amazing that a detail from a Van Eyck portrait should be repeated in the way these angry waters moved. And of course you can find the same meanderings if you watch the clouds in the sky.

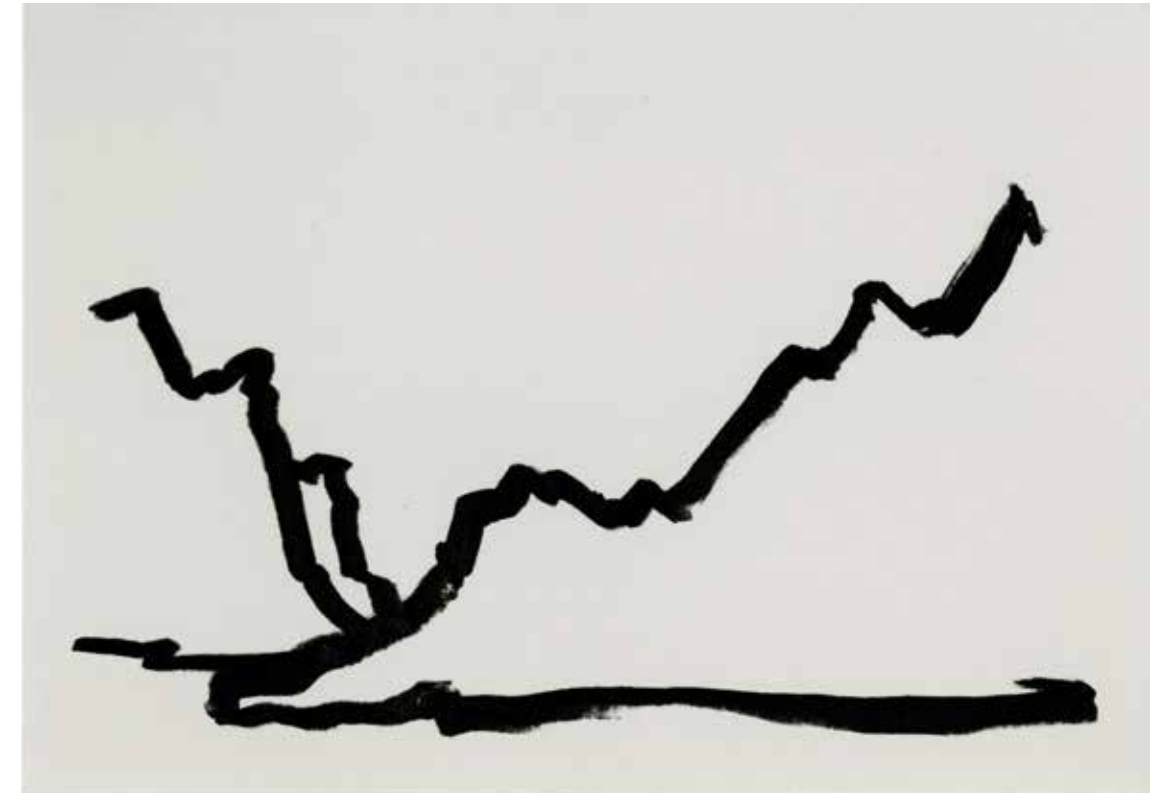
MP: You might say life itself is a labyrinth.

FV: Yes, and you have to accept losing yourself in it to find yourself again - perhaps finding a new aspect of yourself.

MP: Which you have done more than once, when you left for China, then came back ten years later to France.

FV: Everything is in flux, like those clouds in the sky. And what is fascinating in painting is to be in contact with that end-less transformation. Heraclitus said you never bathe twice in the same river. That is exactly how it is in painting, and very much the reason why I paint.

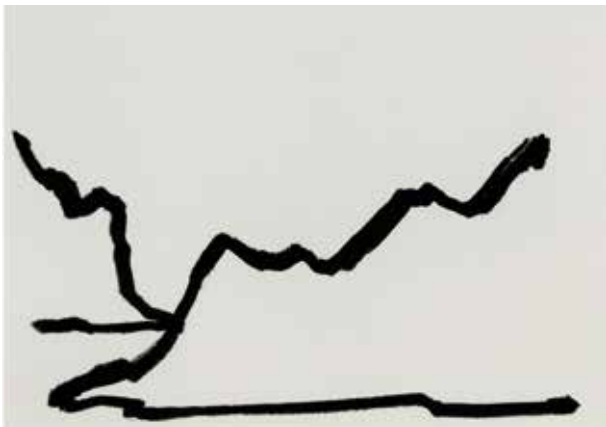
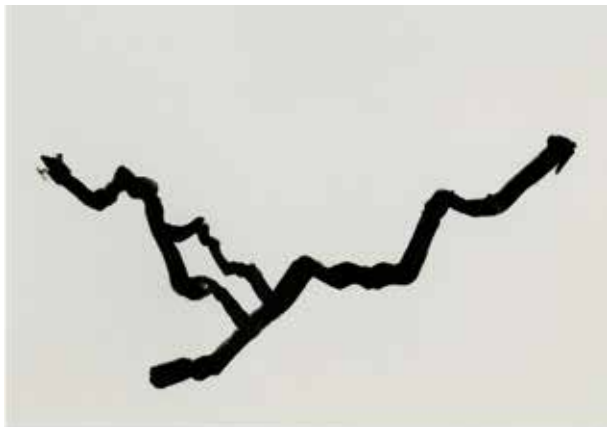
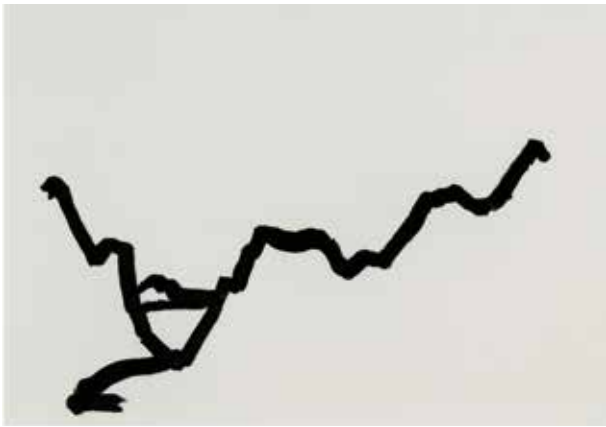
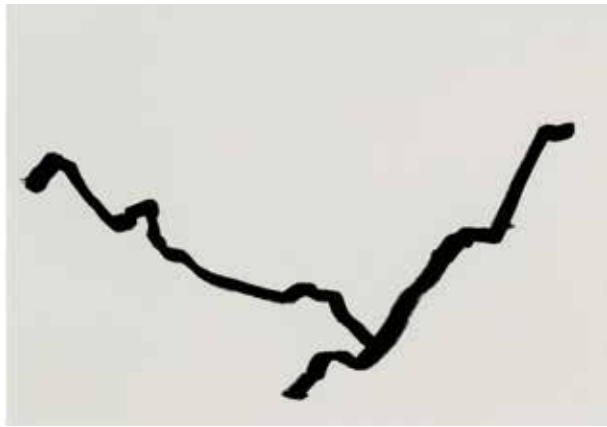
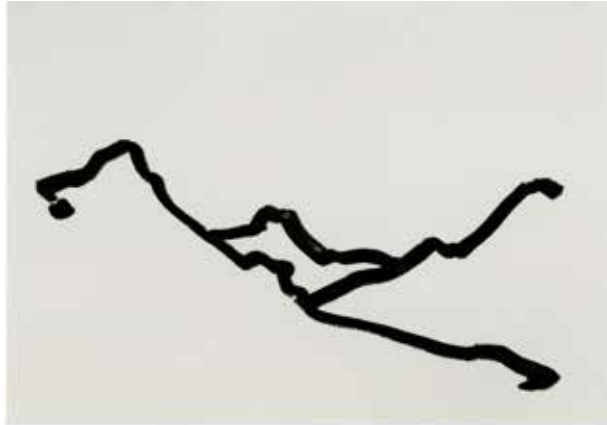
Recent works



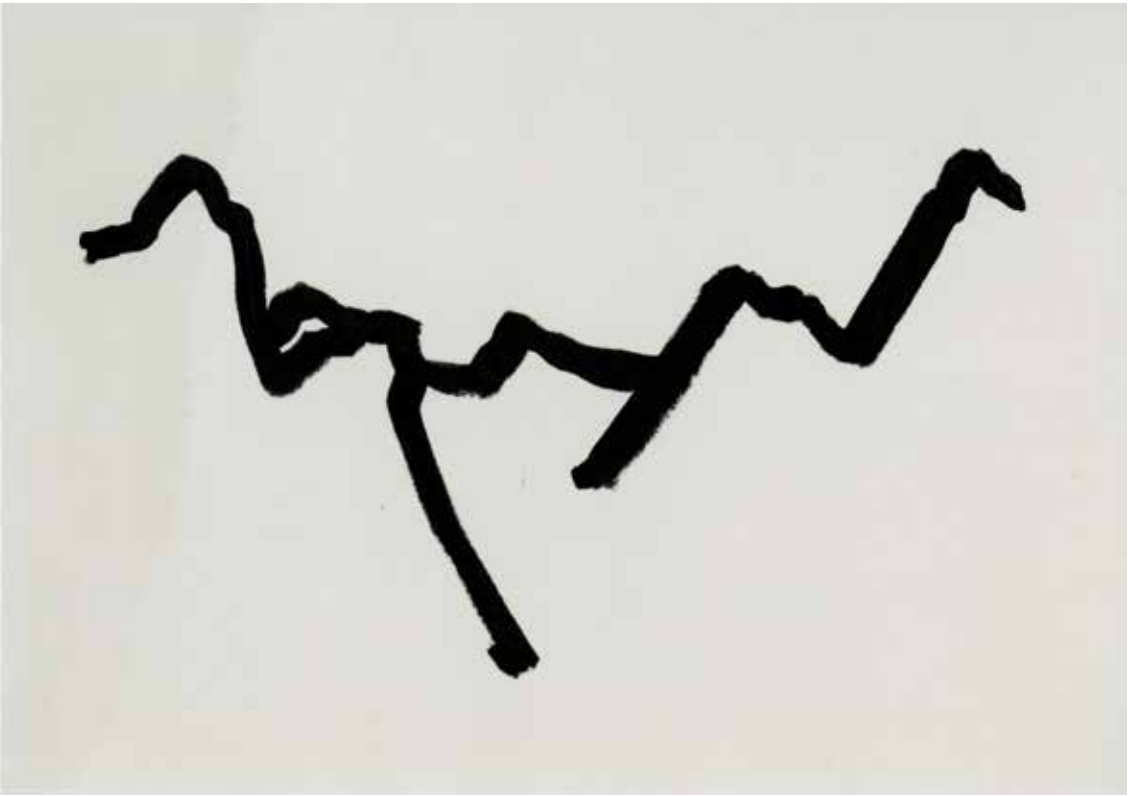
Memories of Norway 2011
Drawing N° 1
Oil pastel on Vélin d'Arches paper
10,5 x 15 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

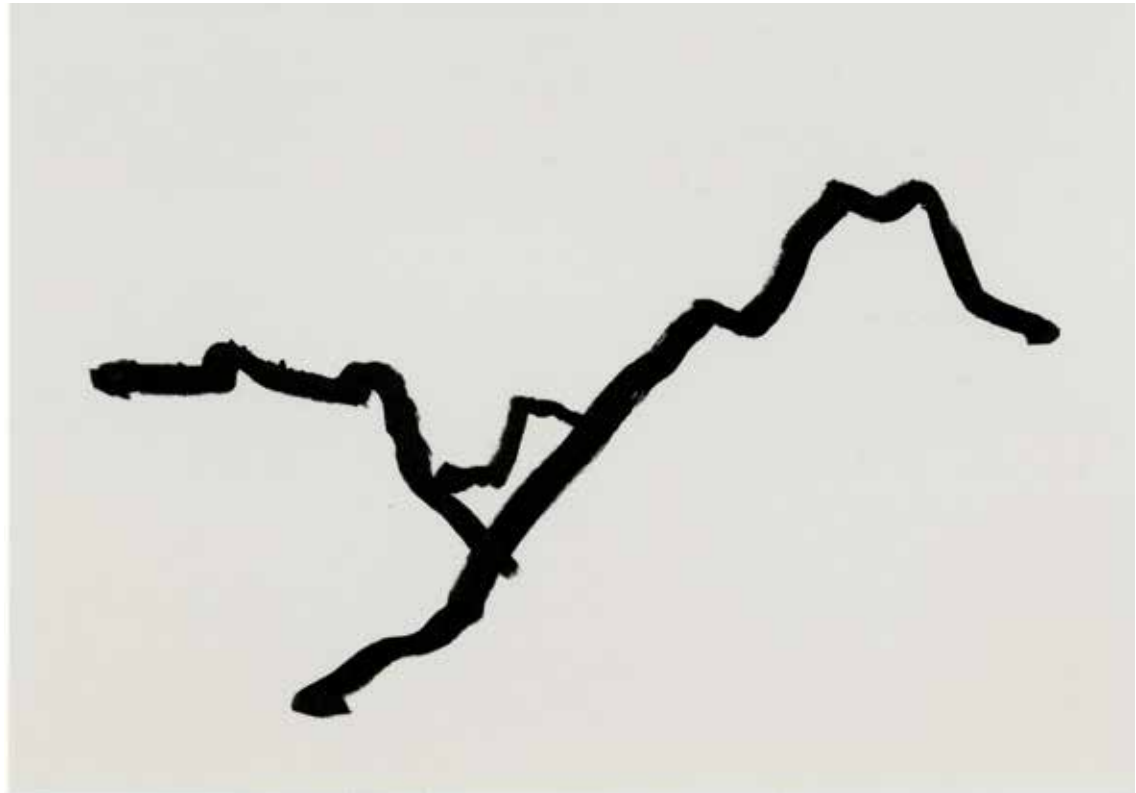




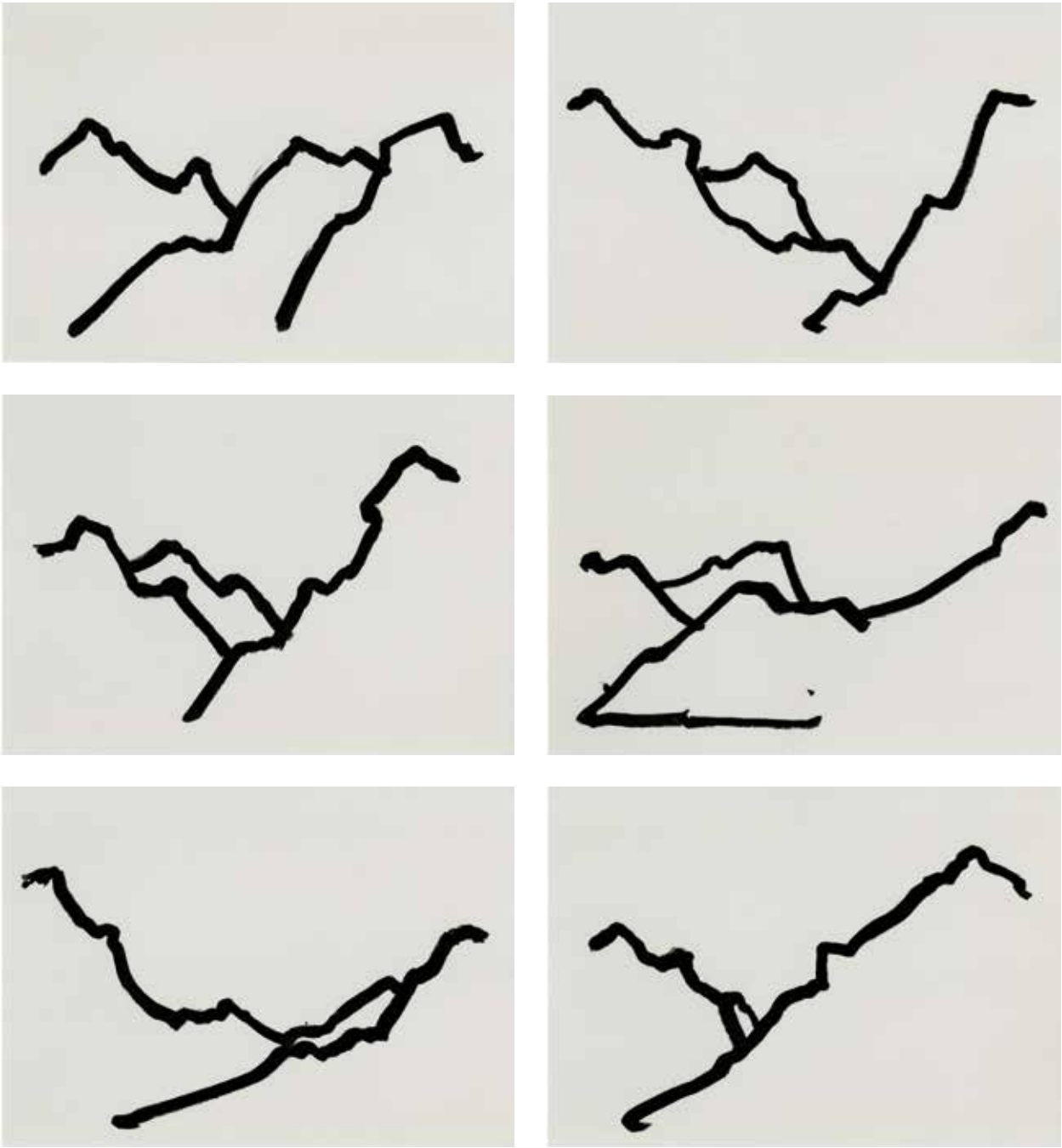
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Drawing N° 2/3/5/6/10/11
Oil pastel on Vélin d'Arches paper
10.5 x 15 cm



Memories of Norway 2011
Drawing N° 14
Oil pastel on Vélin d'Arches paper
10.5 x 15 cm

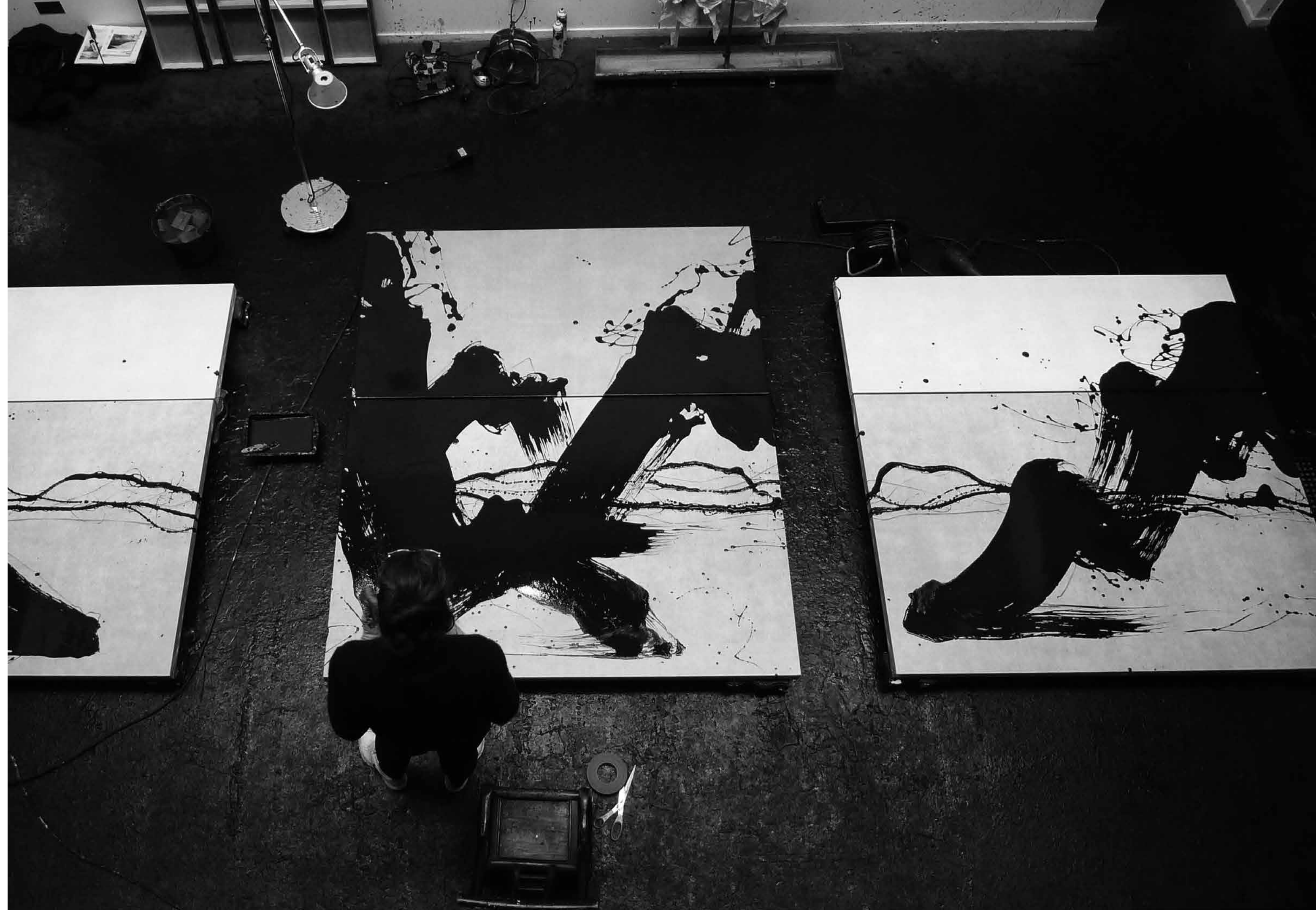


Memories of Norway 2011
 Drawing N°16
 Oil pastel on Vélín d'Arches paper
 10.5 x 15 cm



Memories of Norway 2011
 Drawing N° 17/18/20/24/25/26
 Oil pastel on Vélín d'Arches paper
 10.5 x 15 cm

[Introduction](#)
[Recent works](#)
[Memories of Norway](#)
[Circles](#)
[Fractalscapes](#)
[Energy Fields](#)
[Colour Flows](#)
[Curriculum Vitae](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)



- Introduction
- Recent works**
- Memories of Norway**
- Circles
- Fractalscapes
- Energy Fields
- Colour Flows
- Curriculum Vitae
- Acknowledgements



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Memories of Norway 1 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Vertical Polyptych
211 x 180 cm



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Memories of Norway 2 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Diptych
180 x 241 cm



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Memories of Norway 3 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Diptych
180 x 151 cm



- Introduction
- Recent works**
- Memories of Norway**
- Circles
- Fractalscapes
- Energy Fields
- Colour Flows
- Curriculum Vitae
- Acknowledgements



Memories of Norway 4 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
180 x 364 cm



Memories of Norway 5 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
165 x 356 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Memories of Norway 6 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
70 x 195 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Cercle – Ascèse, Jaune 2012
Mixed media on canvas
183 x 135 cm



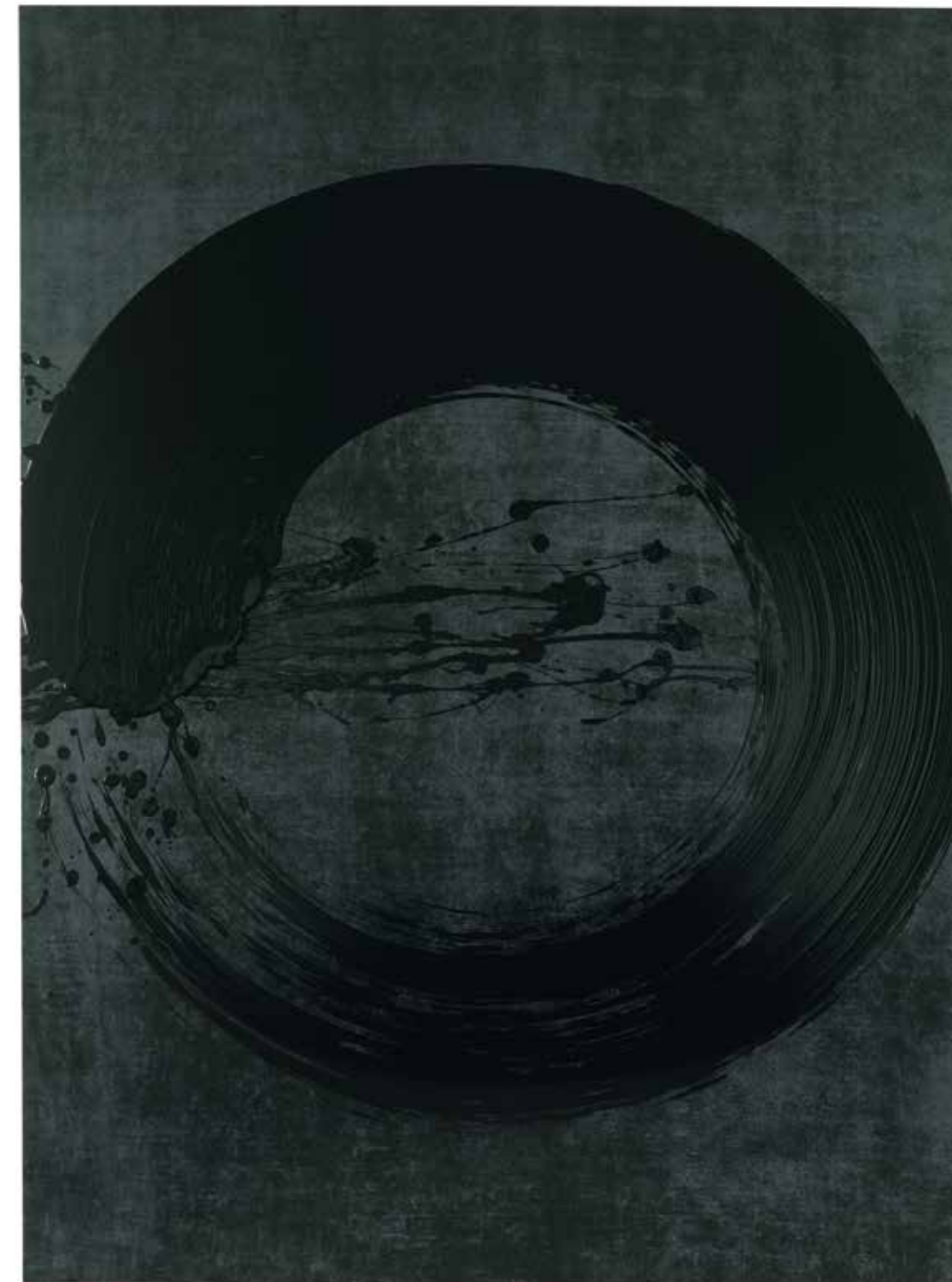
Cercle – Ascèse, Rouge sur vert flamand 2012
 Mixed media on canvas
 183 x 135 cm



Cercle – Ascèse, Bleu 2012
 Mixed media on canvas
 183 x 135 cm



Cercle – Ascèse, Brun clair 2012
 Mixed media on canvas
 183 x 135 cm



Cercle – Ascèse, Noir 2012
 Mixed media on canvas
 183 x 135 cm

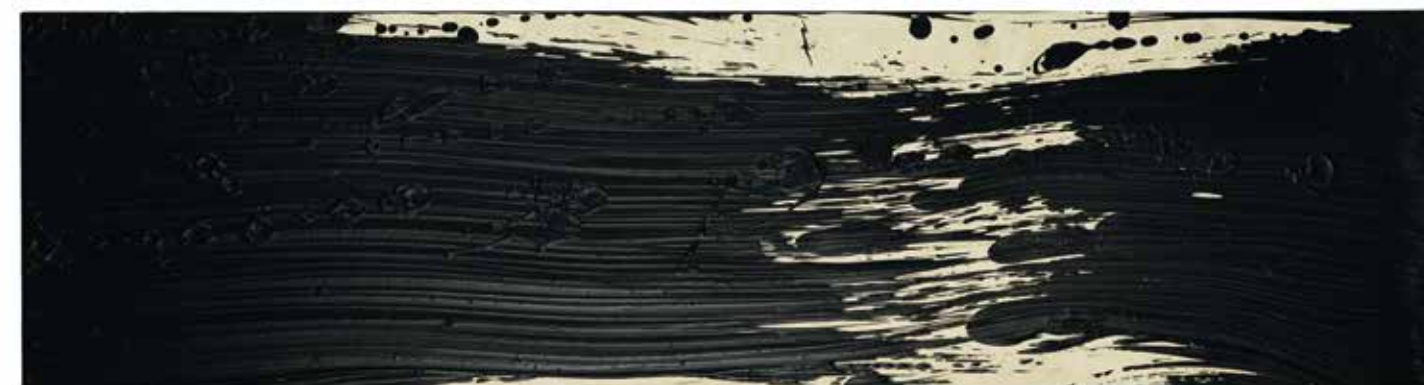
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



[Introduction](#)
[Recent works](#)
[Memories of Norway](#)
[Circles](#)
[Fractalscapes](#)
[Energy Fields](#)
[Colour Flows](#)
[Curriculum Vitae](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)



Fractalscapes I – Paysage dans l'énergie d'un trait 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Vertical Polyptych
170 x 113 cm



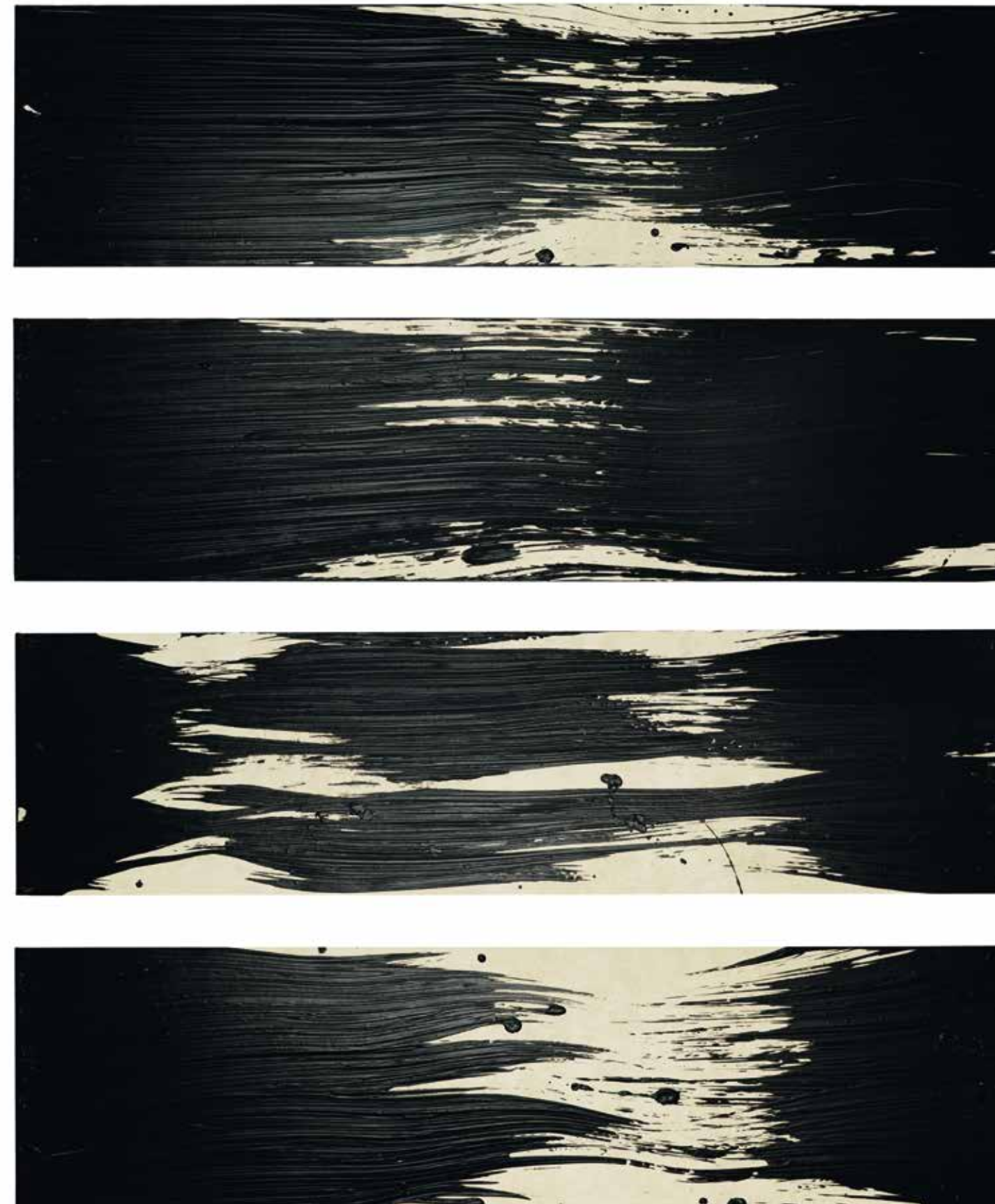
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Fractalscapes II – Paysage dans l'énergie d'un trait 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Vertical Polyptych
170 x 113 cm



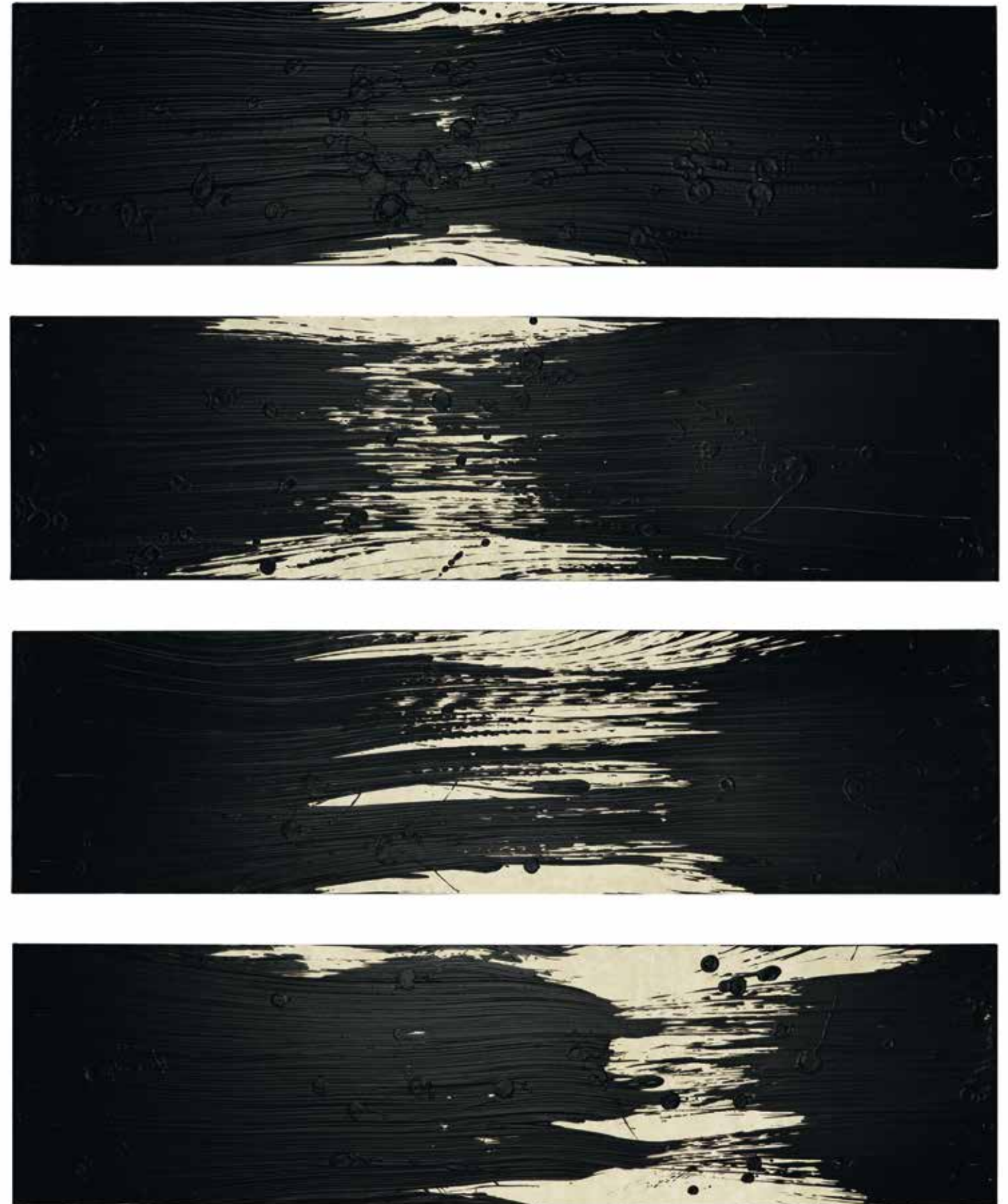
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Fractalscapes III – Paysage dans l'énergie d'un trait 2012
Mixed media on canvas
170 x 113 cm
Vertical Polyptych



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Fractalscapes IV – Paysage dans l'énergie d'un trait 2012
Mixed media on canvas
170 x 113 cm
Vertical Polyptych



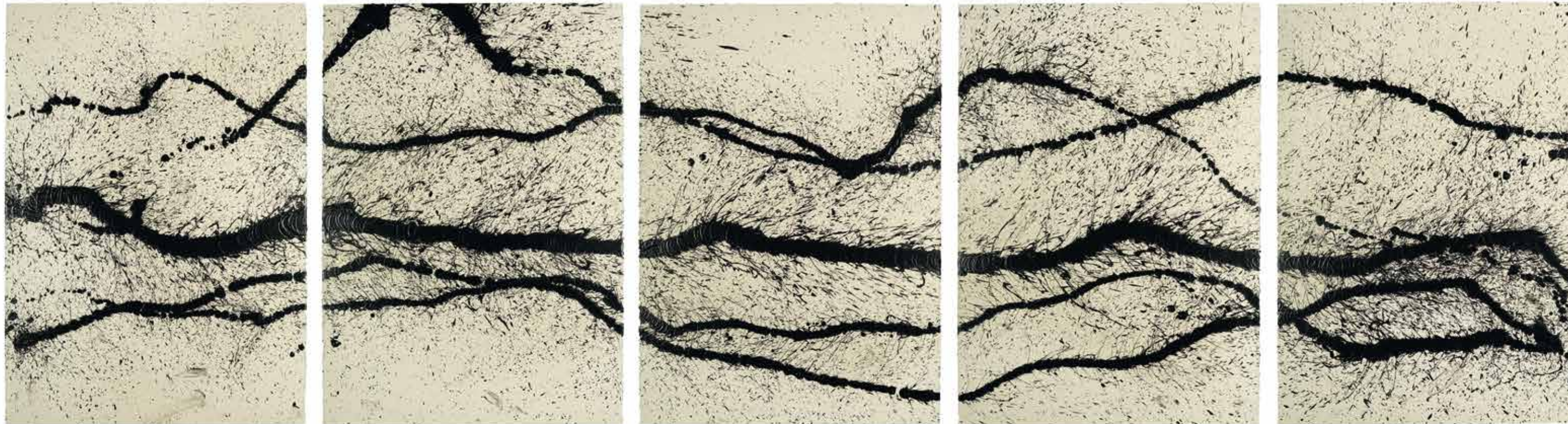
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



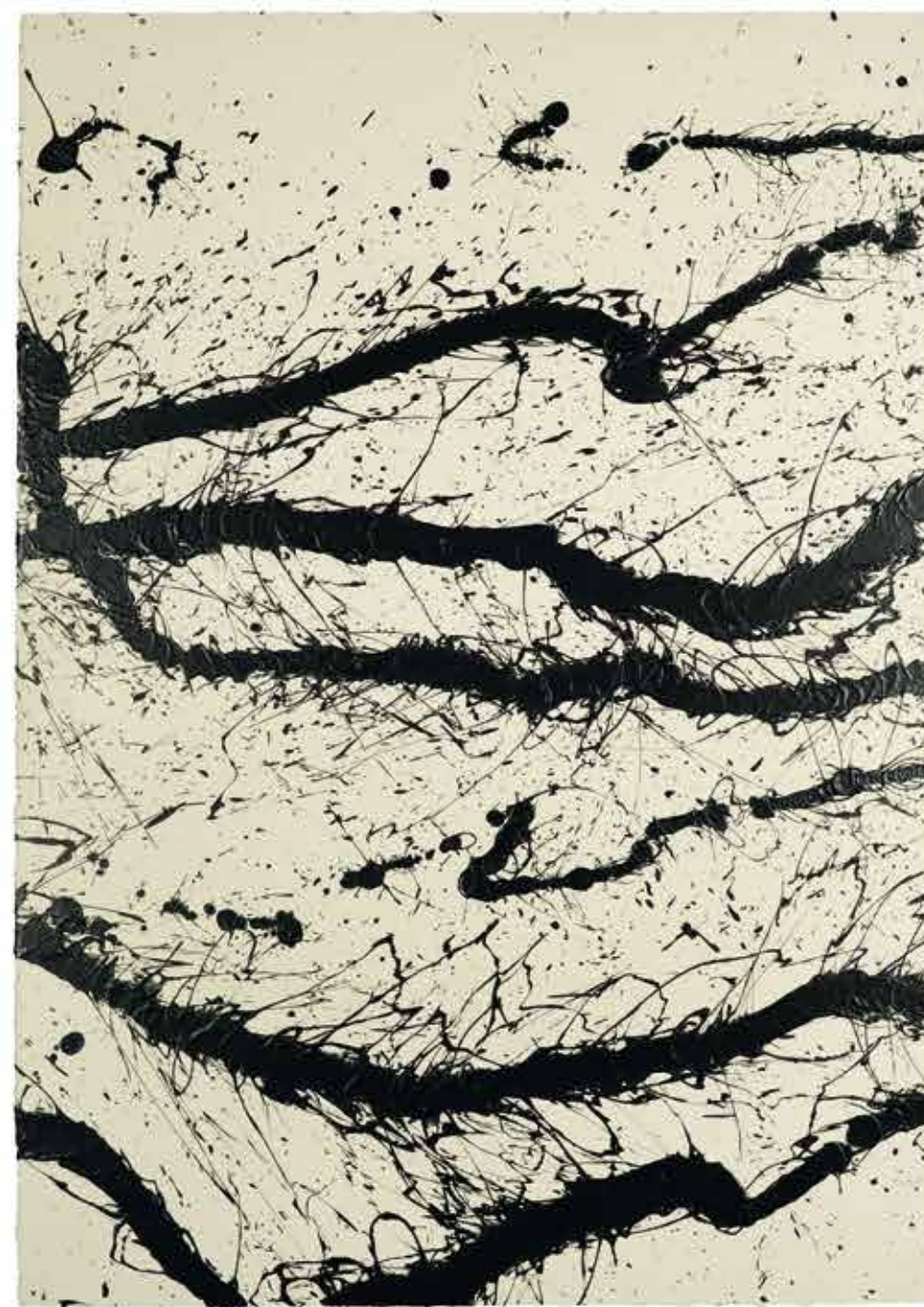
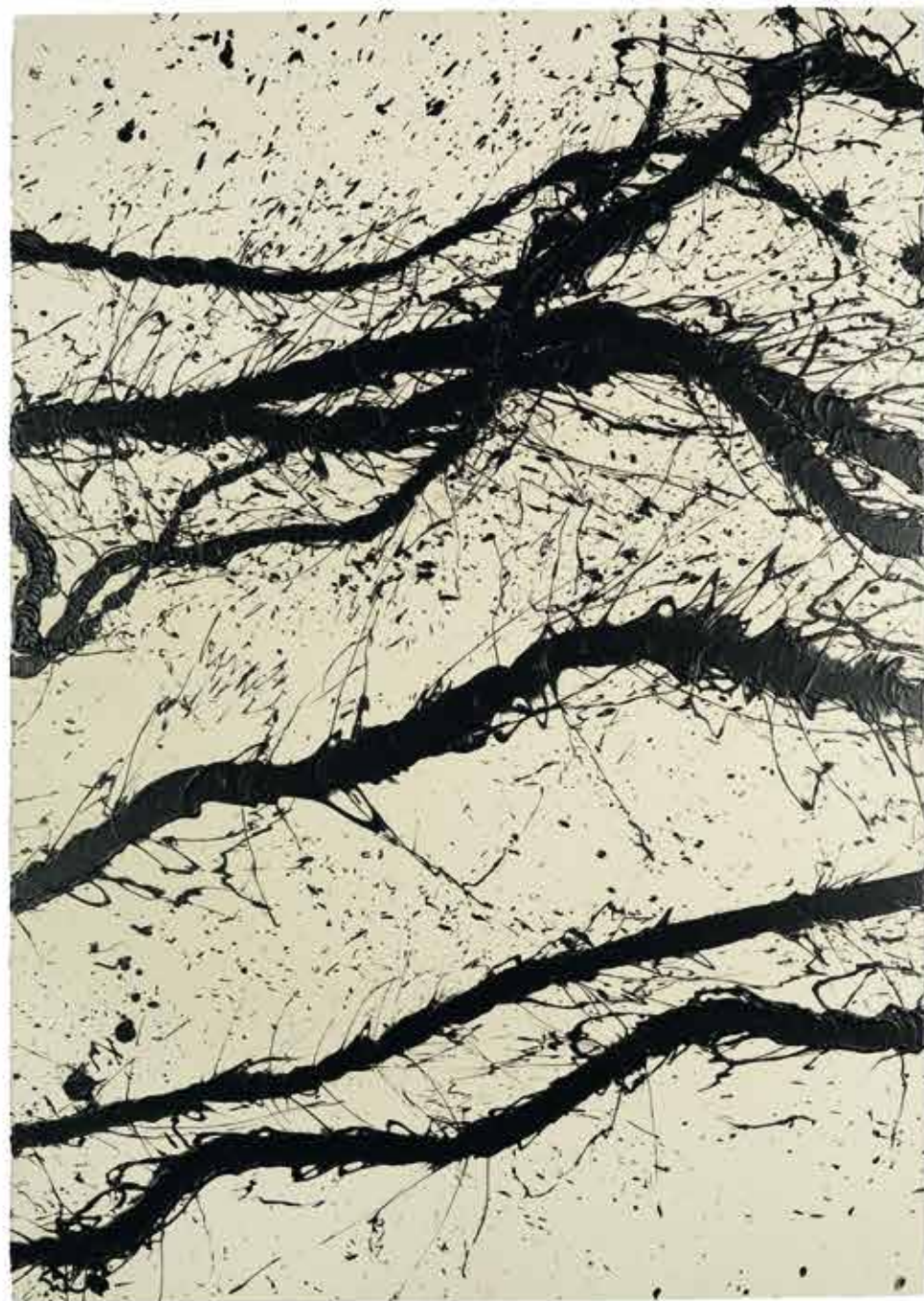


Installation I A,B,C – From the series Energy Fields 2012
 Ink on Moulin du gué paper
 198 x 402 cm

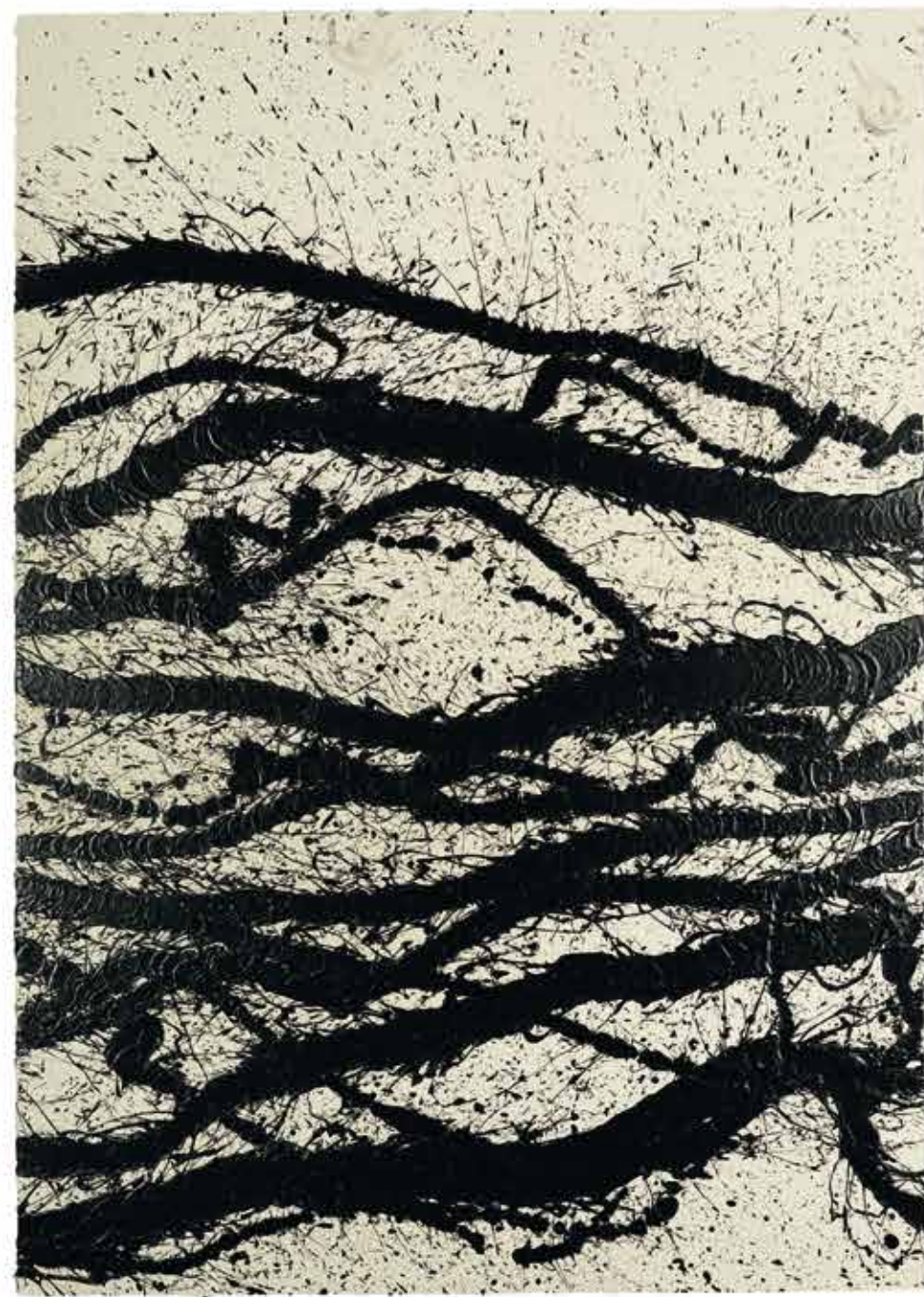
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Installation II A,B,C,D,E – From the series Energy Fields 2012
Ink on Moulin du gué paper
198 x 670 cm



Installation III A,B,C - From the series Energy Fields 2012
 Ink on Moulin du gué paper
 198 x 402 cm



Installation IV A,B,C – From the series Energy Fields 2012
 Ink on Moulin du gué paper
 198 x 402 cm

- Introduction
- Recent works**
- Memories of Norway
- Circles
- Fractalscapes
- Energy Fields**
- Colour Flows
- Curriculum Vitae
- Acknowledgements



Installation V A,B,C,D – From the series Energy Fields 2012
Ink on Moulin du gué paper
198 x 536 cm

[Introduction](#)
[Recent works](#)
[Memories of Norway](#)
[Circles](#)
[Fractalscapes](#)
[Energy Fields](#)
[Colour Flows](#)
[Curriculum Vitae](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)



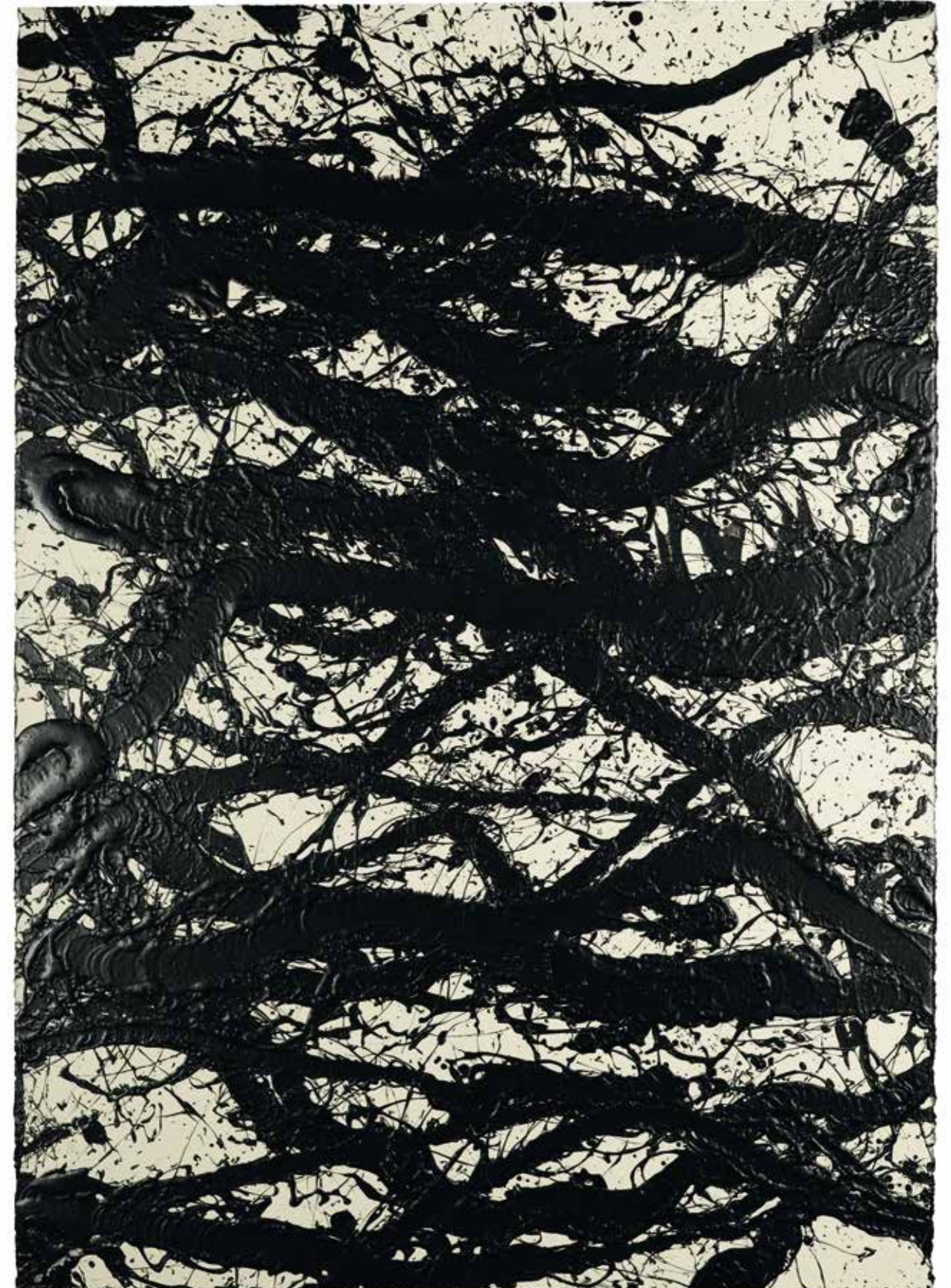
Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Installation VI – From the series Energy Fields 2012
Ink on Moulin du gué paper
198 x 134 cm



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements

Installation VII - From the series Energy Fields 2012
Ink on Moulin du gué paper
198 x 134 cm



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Introduction

Recent works

Memories of Norway

Circles

Fractalscapes

Energy Fields

Colour Flows

Curriculum Vitae

Acknowledgements

Colour Flows 1 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Polyptych
291 x 250 cm



- Introduction
- Recent works**
- Memories of Norway
- Circles
- Fractalscapes
- Energy Fields
- Colour Flows**
- Curriculum Vitae
- Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 2 2012
Mixed media on canvas
40 x 46 cm



Colour Flows 3 2012
Mixed media on canvas
40 x 46 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 4 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Triptych
183 x 350 cm

- Introduction
- Recent works**
- Memories of Norway
- Circles
- Fractalscapes
- Energy Fields
- Colour Flows**
- Curriculum Vitae
- Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 5 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
46 x 132 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 6 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
60 x 140 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 7 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Triptych
143 x 257 cm

Introduction
Recent works
Memories of Norway
Circles
Fractalscapes
Energy Fields
Colour Flows
Curriculum Vitae
Acknowledgements



Colour Flows 8 2012
Mixed media on canvas
Horizontal Polyptych
56 x 186 cm

Curriculum Vitae

Selected Biography

1962	Born in Paris.
1983	Graduated from Ecole des Beaux-arts de Toulouse.
1984	Awarded a post-graduate scholarship at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China.
1984-1993	Studied painting, aesthetics, and philosophy at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, China, with some of the last great traditional masters.
2003	Publication of Passagère du silence, dix ans d'initiation en Chine (Passenger of Silence: Ten Years of Initiation in China), Albin Michel, Paris; A memoir of her years of studies with Master Huang Yuan. Entered permanent collection of Musée Cernuschi, Paris.
2005	Solo exhibition at Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland.
2007	Publication of monograph Between Heaven and Earth, texts by Charles Juliet and Fabienne Verdier, photography by Dolores Marat and Naoya Hatakeyama (Albin Michel, Paris). Four large works commissioned by H. Looser Foundation: Dialogue with selected American abstract and minimalist artists from the collection (John Chamberlain, Donald Judd, Willem de Kooning, Ellsworth Kelly, and Cy Twombly). Entered permanent collection of Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris.
2008	Group exhibition, "Expansion Résonance", Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.
2009	Group exhibition, "Elles@Centre Pompidou", Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris. Solo exhibition, "Peinture", Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.
2010	Commission of two monumental works for the Palazzo Torlonia, Rome. Documentary film by Philippe Chancel: Fabienne Verdier: Flux, on the creation of these works. Publication of Fabienne Verdier Palazzo Torlonia, text by Corinna Thierolf, Chief Curator of Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (Editions Xavier Barral, Paris).
2011	Group exhibition, "Art of Deceleration from Caspar David Friedrich to Ai Wei Wei", Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany.
2012	Group exhibition, "My Private Passion – Foundation Hubert Looser", Kunstforum, Vienna, Austria. Group exhibition at Waddington Custot Gallery, London. Publication of monograph by Doris von Drathen, Fabienne Verdier–Painting Space, Charta, Milano/New York.

Introduction	Solo Exhibitions		Private Collections	
Recent works	(selected)		(selected)	
Curriculum Vitae				
Acknowledgements	1983	Palais des Beaux-arts, Toulouse, France	Collection Monique Barbier-Mueller	
	1989	Fine Arts Museum, Chongqing, China	Collection Stephane Custot	
	1991	French Cultural Center, Beijing	Collection Ariane Dandois	
	1992	Maison de la Chine, Paris	Collection Bruce Kovner	
	1993	Hong Kong Contemporary Art Center	Collection Hubert Looser	
	1995	Galerie Joyce Ma, Palais Royal, Paris	Collection Elie de Rothschild	
	1996	Galerie Joyce Ma, Palais Royal, Paris	Collection Uli Sigg	
	1997	Pacific Cultural Foundation, Taipei	Collection Olimpia Torlonia	
	2001	Chapelle des Beaux-arts, Paris		
	2003	Galerie Ariane Dandois, Paris		
	2004	Abbaye de Silvacane, Provence, France		
2005	Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland	Public Collections		
2007	Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland			
2009	Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris			
Group Exhibitions				
(selected)				
	1990	“Contemporary Brushstrokes”, Beijing Fine Art Museum, China.	Musée National d’Art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris	
	2006	Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne, Switzerland (since exhibited at Art Basel).	Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris (Commission by the Festival d’Avignon)	
	2008	“Expansion Résonnances”, Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.	Ministère de l’Équipement (Direction de l’Architecture), Paris	
	2009	“Elles@Centre Pompidou”, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris.	Honda Group, Tokyo	
	2011	“Un souffle venu d’Asie, regards croisés” (A Fresh Breeze from Asia, Crossing Gazes), Contemporary Art Center, Abbaye de Beaulieu-en Rouergue, France.	Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris	
		“Not for Sale”, Art Center Passage de Retz, Paris.	Chinese Ministry of Culture, Beijing	
		“Art of Deceleration from Caspar David Friedrich to Ai Wei Wei”, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany.	Musée Cernuschi, Paris	
	2012	“My Private Passion – Foundation Hubert Looser”, Kunstforum, Vienna, Austria.	Palais de l’Assemblée Nationale, Paris	
		Waddington Custot Gallery, London.	Foundation H. Looser, Zurich	
			Foundation François Pinault, Paris, Venice	

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